

With the compliments and regards of
Holmesburg Pa William Bender Wilson
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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

AS I KNEW HIM



BY

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Abraham Lincoln as I Knew Him

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William Bender Wilson

An address at King Library, Andalusia, February 12, 1909.

My Friends :

This is an inspiring scene and one that would have appealed to Abraham Lincoln, for if he had an overpowering passion, it was to be found in his deep affection for young people. Could he stand here tonight and look upon the bright, intelligent youth assembled, who in the fast rolling years will become a part of that host into whose hands the destiny of this great Republic must repose his great nature would expand in pride and his great heart send out unlimited streams of love to them.

Abraham Lincoln's career is the most interesting and instructive in American annals. Few men of any race or Nation have shown greater courage, patience, resolution and versatility and his great achievements cover his name with imperishable glory. Every patriotic American, whatever his bias, takes pride in his memory and every citizen should esteem it a duty to study his history.

The academician has given us a fine concrete portraiture, of what he was and what he stood for, which embodies the advanced thought of the day in which he lived as well as the beneficent results to mankind that followed the Civil War. That war was a political revolution made necessary by the compromises in the Constitution and Abraham Lincoln was raised up by Providence to lead the forces of right. All the National progressive elements in the revolution clustered around and supported him in his leadership and their component parts enter into the mosaic of today which we call by his name. I would not lessen the admiration and love for the Lincoln any more than for the Washington mosaic which we all revere. Both are National studies of the most virtuous character and the example set forth in them should be emulated by all who desire our country's progress to be along the higher needs of civilization. There

was, however, a purely human Abraham Lincoln—Lincoln as the man, the father, the Statesman, as displayed in his every day conduct while President, which in the nature of things latter day orators and writers cannot depict from personal knowledge because they came on the stage of life after that last sad day forty-four years ago, when his life ended in tragedy. There are not many living persons who came daily in touch with him through those troublesome days of the war. Of the limited number there are none who saw him more often and in plainer light than the few surviving members of the United States Military Telegraph Corps, who served in the War Department at Washington. Mr. David Homer Bates, one of these few survivors, has contributed a very valuable book to the Lincoln literature entitled, "Lincoln in the Telegraph Office." As another of those survivors and one who preceded Mr. Bates as manager of the Military Telegraph in the Department, I would add my contribution to the centennial memorial of his birth.

The Military Telegraph Corps was the very nerves of the Army during the war and so considered by all those who came in contact with it. The position of its members in the army was a peculiar one, whether enlisted men or volunteers, and there were both classes in the service, they were not subject to the orders of its active officers, but came under the immediate direction of President Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief, through the Secretary of War. They were in effect his field couriers, with enlarged responsibilities. The secrets of the Nation were entrusted to them, and the countersign of the army was often in their possession a week or more in advance of its promulgation. All the movements of the army, all the confidence of the commanders were entrusted to them, and yet not one was ever known to betray that knowledge and confidence in the most remote degree.

In the advance, when the army was advancing, in the midst of battle and bringing up in the rear in the army's retreat, the Corps left upon the battlefield, in the hospitals and war prisons, hundreds of its members, who were never restored to family, home and friends.

Beginning at Yorktown, where poor Lathrop was killed by one of Magruder's buried torpedoes, from East to West, and from North to South, as our armies marched and fought, until the Nation's cause was won at Appomattox, almost every field, almost every march, numbered one of the telegraph boys among the fallen.

A hundred nameless graves throughout the battlefields of the Union attest their devotion unto death to the sublime cause in which they were engaged, and yet the government they loved and labored for never as much as thanked them for their services.

Every nation, ours among the number, operates a Military Telegraph, and yet, before the Civil War in the United States such an arm of the service was practically unknown. It was reserved for mere boys, American boys, to inaugurate that arm of

the service, demonstrate its value in actual war, and for so doing become the recipients of the monumental ingratitude of the Nineteenth Century!

My own experience as a military telegrapher was varied. After organizing the telegraph service at Harrisburg, I joined Colonel Scott in Washington on the 2nd of May, 1861, and became Manager of the Military Telegraph office in the War Department, from which vantage ground many of the innermost secrets and actions of the administration of public affairs, both civil and military, became known to me. Mr. Lincoln was a constant visitor to the office both during the hours of the day and night, keeping the finger of one hand on the pulse of the country, whilst with the forefinger of the other he pointed out the roads for the army to take. I saw him on many occasions when the skies were overcast and many friends of the country were yielding to despair, I was with him at the time the "Harriet Lane" ran the enemy's batteries on the lower Potomac, during the first battle of Bull Run, the disaster at Ball's Bluff, the capture of Mason and Slidell, and other trying periods in those days of blood. One of the most trying was on Sunday, the 9th of March, 1862. News of the rebel ram "Merrimac" having come out of the James river, sunk the "Cumberland" burnt the "Congress" and grounded the "Minnesota," "St. Lawrence" and "Roanoke," reached us via boat from Fortress Monroe to Cape Charles, thence by wire. In person I apprised the President and Secretary of the Navy Welles of the disaster. Immediately they came to the War Department Telegraph office. It was an anxious morning. The supposition was that the victorious "Merrimac," having nothing to oppose it, would reduce Fortress Monroe, make its way up the Potomac, and bombard Washington. Captain Dahlgren, then Commandant at the Navy Yard, was sent for and brought into consultation. He advised loading canal boats with stone and sinking them in the shallowest part of the Potomac, which was at Cuttle Fish Shoals. His suggestions were being carried into execution when the glorious achievement of the "Monitor" was flashed over the wires, relieving the tension and turning gloom into joy. Mr. Lincoln, throughout that whole trying day, when the loss of the capital seemed reasonably sure, lost not a particle of faith in the cause and its ultimate success, but remained the cool, clear headed adviser he always was when the clouds were the darkest.

I was twenty-two years old when I was installed in the office, at which time my prejudices did not favor the view that Mr. Lincoln was competent to bring about a successful solution of the problem then confronting the country. But the youthful mind is susceptible to the grasping of truth, when faithfully presented, and it was scarcely two days after I came in personal touch with him, when my opinions underwent a complete change, as I perceived by his words and actions that a great and powerful man, capable of meeting any responsibility had been raised up for our country's glory.

The polished Seward, with his choice but coldly spoken rhet-

oric, was a self-appointed guardian of the President, and accompanied him wherever he went with the scarcely concealed view of being his monitor. This guardianship did not annoy Mr. Lincoln in the least, but, disregarding it, he moved along on his own lines and in his own way. It was not long before the distinguished Secretary of State and the world at large discovered that the very unpretentiousness of Lincoln's inborn greatness overshadowed his own deserved renown.

No man in American history developed so rapidly and became in so short a time the embodiment of the broadest statesmanship of the loftiest standard as Abraham Lincoln. In the many telegrams he indited or dictated and in the conversation with those who accompanied him to the war telegraph office he displayed a wonderful knowledge of the country, its resources and requirements, as well as an intuition of the needs and wants of the people. There was nothing ornamental in or about him, but he was, just as he appeared, an honest, wise and homely man, a true representative of a great people and of a great principle of government. He was entirely unselfish and acted from a sense of duty and his actions were, to the extent of his information, the expressions of the National will. He was a man with all the attributes that enter into manhood. He had the ambitions, affections, longings and passions of other men, but held them under such control so as to exercise them for the benefit of common humanity and not to use them for self-gratification. There was nothing false about him and while he might curtain his thoughts and intentions as a matter of temporary policy it was not for the purpose of deception, but to guard against the plucking of unripe fruit. While he was kind and tolerant to those who held different opinions from his own and freely communicated with those who came in contact with him, yet he impressed me with having but one confidant and that one his Creator. Mr. Lincoln was typical of the people of his times and their virtues are embalmed in the memories of his heroic figure. Although a man of gentleness and amiability, of peace and quietness, he displayed an unbending tenacity of purpose. His generous sympathies broadly distributed were particularly shown in his intercourse with the young. As a father he was considerate and kind and his treatment of his boys most beautiful; he made them his companions and entered with zest in all things which interested them. On the death of "Willie" his deep but silent grief was very pathetic and caused the melancholy lines of his features to sink into furrows. No better illustration of his sympathetic feeling for the young can be given than the narration of a little incident in which I was involved:

One day an alarm from the Governor of Indiana sent me hurriedly to the Executive Mansion to convey its substance to the President. He did not seem to be disturbed by it, possibly from the fact that border alarms, or, as he quaintly termed them "border skeers," were so frequent that the keen edge of the anxiety produced by them had long since been worn off. The one in question, however, he considered of sufficient importance

to cause him to return with me to the War Department for the purpose of having a "wire talk with the perturbed Governor." Calling one of his two younger sons to join him we three started from the White House between stately trees along a gravel path, which led to the rear of the old War Department building. It was a warm day and Mr. Lincoln wore as a part of his costume a faded gray linen duster which hung loosely around his long, gaunt frame; his kindly eye was beaming with good nature and his ever thoughtful brow unruffled. We had barely reached the gravel path before he stooped over, picked up a round, smooth pebble and shooting it off his thumb, challenged us to a game of "followings" which we accepted. Each in turn tried to hit the outlying stone which was being projected onward by the President. The game was short but exciting; the cheerfulness of childhood, the ambition of young manhood and the gravity of the statesman were all injected into it. It was not won until the steps of the War Department were reached. Every inch of its progress was toughly contested and when the President was declared victor it was only by a hand-span. He seemed as much pleased as if the army had won a battle, but softened the defeat of the vanquished by attributing his success to his greater height of person and longer stretch of arm.

His treatment of we young men in the war telegraph office was affectionately tender. He always spoke to us in terms of easy familiarity and when he did, the melancholy characteristics of his features would soften into smiles. Many a lesson, quaintly put, we learned from him. One day he took advantage of the opportunity and, in his own inimitable way to impress upon my mind that there are two sides to a question, he dropped into the office with a pleasant "Good morning my young friend, what news?" to which I responded, "Good morning, Mr. President, good news, because there is not any." "Ah," said he, "my young friend that rule does not always hold good for a fisherman does not consider it good luck when he cannot get a bite."

One of my nephews, a young lad, very thoughtful beyond his years, and who had been raised in a pro-slavery though patriotic atmosphere, was visiting in Washington, and I took him with me to my office. While he was there Mr. Lincoln came in and placing his hand on the lad's head said, "What a fine boy, where did he come from?" "He is my nephew from Pennsylvania," I informed him and then turning to the boy said, "This is President Lincoln." The child took the extended hand and looking up into the President's eyes inquired in a most serious manner, "and is this Abraham Lincoln, the abolition President of these United States?" A smile broke over Mr. Lincoln's features and then addressing Mr. Seward in rather a pathetic tone of voice said, "Governor, the children even do not understand me."

Mr. Lincoln's diction was perfect and he had the ability of producing a clear understanding of what he meant to convey by

the use of familiar and appealing words. His using in my presence of the word "skeered," "hunkered" and "by jinks" called forth adverse criticism from Seward, which petty attacks on his intelligence he did not resent but seemed to enjoy the hidden rebuke in his replies. Our office, as I have stated, was a place he came to constantly for information and to transact business; it was also a place of refuge where he could escape at times from the incessant importunities of place hunters and favor seekers. Hurrying one afternoon into the office and dropping into a chair with shortened breath, he exclaimed, "By jinks, we are here at last." Seward, evidently not differentiating between "by jinks" which means an escape and "by jingo," which refers to the Lord on high, remarked in cold blooded pendency, "Mr. President you are swearing before these young men." Mr. Lincoln, with a twinkle in his eye, ignoring any illusion to the word "jinks," apologized to us for swearing before us, saying 'by' is a swear word for my good old mother taught me that anything which had a 'by' before it is swearing."

The peculiar cadence in which he emphasized the word "by" must have burned into Seward. At least we thought it did. At another time he sat down at the instrument table to write a telegram and while he was thus engaged a call came over the wires and I was compelled to lean over him to answer it. Seeing my movement and recognizing the import of my action he arose from his seat saying, "Have I hunkered you out of your chair?" Seward immediately spoke up with "Where did you learn that inelegant word?" As quick as a flash came the reply, "Down in old Kentucky." Seward, with all his learning, did not seem to know that "hunkered" was provincial English which had come from England, filtered through Pennsylvania and Virginia and lodged in Kentucky and means by use of power dispossessing a person of something that belonged to him, and Mr. Lincoln just suggested by his reply that he go to Kentucky to find out its meaning.

I can never forget the greatness of his sympathetic nature as shown on the night of the day upon which the first battle of Bull Run was fought. The advancing shades of the evening told of defeat and as they advanced of a wild, uncontrollable flight of the National troops, the waning hours brought with them a terrific storm of thunder, lightning and a heavy downpour of rain. It was a gloomy hour at the Capital; every moment it was expected that the guns of the victorious enemy would be battering down the gates and that the administration of government would have to flee northward. Mr. Lincoln felt that the hour of the Nation's greatest peril had arrived and while making preparations to meet its emergencies the saddened lines of his countenance deepened and his whole soul seemed to go out in sympathy to the dying, the sick and wounded, the foot-sore and the weary.

In my library hangs a testimonial bearing his signature which I esteem as one of the most valuable of my earthly possessions. Its history is this: On the 7th of March, 1862, Mr.

Lincoln, Assistant Adjutant General Townsend and Assistant Secretary of the Navy C. V. Fox assembled in my office to perfect an important united service movement. The business being concluded an easy conversation ensued during which I told the President I was going to the front to smell powder. He expressed his regret at my leaving the department and after generously saying "we are very sorry to lose you," added, "when you go you must carry a character with you." Not comprehending just what he meant, I said, "I hope, sir, that is always observable." In most sympathetic tones came from his lips the words, "Oh, my young friend, of course, of course, you have. You misunderstood my remark. I mean you ought to have a recommendation from your last place; something like a 'karactur' such as a mistress gives to her departing maid." Readily grasping the idea and the value such a document would be to me I thanked him and said, "I would like to have it," whereupon he instructed Colonel Townsend to prepare it upon the official headings of the Army. The document prepared at the dictation of the President, after reciting the position I had occupied, wound up by saying, "I was thrown in contact with Mr. Wilson at all times of night and day, and I could not fail to remark upon the efficiency and fidelity as well as upon the great kindness and courtesy with which he has uniformly conducted the Military Telegraph under his charge."

The language of that testimonial was Mr. Lincoln's own; and after it was written he instructed Col. Townsend to sign it in his official capacity, turned to Mr. Fox and remarked that as the Army had made its record in the premises the Navy, which had received the same kind of service, should say something. Mr. Fox immediately wrote across the paper, "Cheerfully and fully endorsed. C. V. Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy." That being done, Mr. Lincoln took up the paper and said, "To make that 'karactur' complete the Commander-in-Chief should bear his testimony," and taking up his pen wrote, "And I, A. Lincoln."

As no other such testimonial exists it may be inferred that it is precious in my eyes, but I tell of its existence not with any vain-gloriousness but to illustrate the thoughtful kindness of Abraham Lincoln to a young man who had no other backing excepting his adherence to duty. There are many things which I might tell illustrating Mr. Lincoln's character in his humanity, charity, benevolence and sympathy, but they belong to the confidences of the telegraph, which are eternally inviolate and my tongue must be silent. But there is one matter in his life which I can mention although with great hesitancy and that is the relation of his wife to him and his administration. My knowledge of her was gleaned from my intimate relations with the President. Of course I cannot repeat private conversations, but I can say of Mrs. Lincoln that no more patriotic American woman and no more devoted wife and mother lived in the United States. Her country, her home and her family were paramount considerations with her. She entered Washington

society when her ideal was the home that she and thousands of other good women had established and she thought of carrying it into the White House. When she entered that famous abode, she tried to live her Springfield, Ill., life, but was met with a social condition that was foreign to her training and tastes. Intellectually, she was the equal of those she came in contact with, but social Washington, before her advent, was aristocratic, based upon and cultivated from the luxuriance of people who reaped but did not cultivate. Her ideas were the very reverse of that proposition and scorning social leadership on that basis she devoted herself to her husband and sons. She exerted herself to the uttermost in compensating her husband daily for the very trying calls made upon him and did all in her power to relieve him. She was a noble woman and when comparisons are made to her detriment with other women in the limelight of Washington life they are made without knowledge of conditions of her true character which was that of a true democrat, a true wife, a true mother and a true woman who lived and was true to her country.

I would if I could add leaf to leaf to the laurel wreath that crowns the brow of Abraham Lincoln's fame. As an American I honor his memory; as a man I cherish it. He never strove for the unobtainable but did his best and left the rest with God. It was living that principle that created his character. He came from the common people, was one of them, received a practical education through contact with them, and throughout life was their representative. He was no God, no saint, but typified in his person pure, representative popular government. As in life he belonged, so in sacred memory he belongs to his countrymen because he did the best he could, whether as a railsplitter, a flat boatman, a lawyer, a legislator, or a statesman, and he will live in the history of his times as one who was unflinching in his devotion to duty, unswerving in his fidelity to a great cause, one whose every breath poured forth the purest sentiments of patriotism, and as one who tried to live a manly life within the bounds of his comprehension of manhood's aims and duties. He held his life as a holy trust and so lived it that as time moves on what he accomplished must ever increase in splendor and his memory grow more and more beatific.

This little address delivered at the "King Library," Andalusia, Pa., on the Centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth is dedicated to Miss Helen Thomas.

WILLIAM BENDER WILSON.

February 14, 1909.

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